

Today we might identify an icon as a favorite hockey player, or a movie star and some reality show personality. Part of their attraction is that they are splashed all over our television sets, the internet, and in popular magazines. They are the subject of morning, afternoon and evening talk shows. We are bombarded with celebrity. It kind of makes one think we are not good enough, doesn't it? They live lavish lifestyles that we might envy and only dream of.

Advertisers use these famous people to help sell their products whether it is perfume, jewelry, cars or favourite food products or restaurants. When we go out and purchase whatever they are selling, maybe we might have a feeling or a sense of being lifted up in status too. We are as good as the celebrity, are we not?

There is nothing wrong with having icons or material wealth, but the problem arises when we start to worship those things or those people. What makes matters worse is that we might not even notice we have fallen down the rabbit hole of worshipping these icons. We fall off our faith path with God and it might take years to even notice we have lost touch with our relationship with God.

The ancient Israelites in our first scripture lesson of Numbers had turned to other Gods while in the wilderness. They were disheartened by the wilderness living and lost their patience in God and Moses.

“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” (verse 5)

Even after all God's grand displays of glory, the pillars of cloud and fire, parting of seas, providing daily manna to eat, and more, the grumbling Israelites still had no confidence in the promise of God's deliverance. They had become impatient in the wilderness while finding their way to the promised land. They turned their

worship to idols that they could see and feel. They spoke against Moses and against God.

This angered God, so he sent poisonous snakes that bit the people, and many died. It seems harsh coming from God - but it seemed to have worked as the people turned back around and begged Moses to pray and intervene for them, and he did.

Following God's instructions Moses makes a bronze snake mounted on a pole, so when the people were bitten by snakes they could look up at the bronze snake and be healed and live.

In our gospel today, the writer of the gospel of John uses this story of the bronze snake on a pole to describe the crucifixion of Jesus on the Cross.

“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” (verses 14 – 15)

As we are mid way through this Lenten season, we are encouraged to work at being more conscious and aware of our most random reactions and instant thoughts.

Paul tells the Ephesians, “All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—“.

God is "rich in mercy" and loves and understands each of us as only our Creator can, certainly better than we understand ourselves or each other. Our lives are filled with anxiety, and there are all sorts and conditions of "snakes" that might bite us.

These snake bites can be likened to our sins. These snakes might come into our lives by our own actions as we strive to build up our reserves of earthly material things and icons.

Throughout Lent, we are called to look to Christ and the Cross, in faith, for our salvation, before we are bitten by the snakes of sin. With meaningful prayer and practice over time, even our unconscious thoughts and actions may be less poisonous to ourselves and others.

Meanwhile, let us strive to grow in faith, to accept and feel the infusion of the ever-flowing Grace within us that is a saving antidote to the darkness of sin.

Like the Ancient Israelites, as long as we repent and keep our eyes fixed upon Jesus, we are saved by God and we are given life here and now and into eternity. So let us thank God for his gifts we so abundantly receive, and while we might enjoy our modern day icons and symbols, let us live in faith with expectancy and comfort. Amen.